



The Value of Toys

During the holidays (a.k.a. the gift-giving season), I noticed that software engineers and my children have a lot in common. No, I'm not going to pontificate on preadolescent behaviors, eating too many sugary snacks, or the two schools of thought based on "giving" vs. "getting." Oddly enough, I discovered a similarity in the bright, shiny, childlike smiles on both children's and engineer's faces when they receive a new toy or gadget. There's a similar look of wonderment, intrigue, and embedded thoughts of limitless playtime. And there's the anticipation of finding new, undiscovered toy functionality for both, whether it's the pop-out wings on a new *Transformers* action figure, or the thumbnail-sized coupling *transformer* hidden inside a new PDA device.

Being a long-time IT manager, it feels like what Yogi Berra called "déjà vu all over again." In my first IT management job, I was told by my supervisor that the way to keep IT professionals happy was to give them big monitors and lots of computer memory. Later, she revised her statement to include the new toys coming out, like desktop video conferencing and dual processors. These new devices have really changed the agility of the workforce and have impacted the way we live. On the other hand, these toys have also given those of us who are still kids at heart a renewed interest in our daily jobs.

Like me, I'm sure many "family managers" (a.k.a. moms and dads) struggle with the pros and cons of technological toys at home, with the cell phone probably being the most divisive. It's great to keep our kids in contact and safe. But the texting ... some say it's destroying our children's personal interaction and spelling skills while others say it's speeding their processing and cognitive abilities.

It's just as complicated of a problem for IT professionals and managers. Portable computing and communication devices have a significant impact on the workforce. Here at the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), we did a formal review of "Portable Computing and Communication Devices." The evaluation had four areas: risk management, responsible management, agility of the workforce, and work-life balance.

Risk management is a big issue for all of us. As managers, we need to recognize that laptops, BlackBerrys, and PDAs contain data, sometimes just in the form of e-mail messages, other times in the form of documents. Employees are usually careful with their devices, but given the nature of the data, the potential risk is usually too great. Don't forget Murphy's Law: Whatever can go wrong will go wrong, and at the worst possible time, in the worst possible way. There are articles in the newspapers every week about how these devices have been stolen and lost with grave consequences. So the first question is: Is it an acceptable risk (personally and professionally) to have this device and information carried on and off-site?

The second area of concern is responsible management. It's the old "need vs. want" debate that we've all had, either with our kids or employees ... my sympathies if you're like me, and have had these conversations with both! Parents of the '80s: Do you remember the pre-dawn frenzied shopping stampedes to get our kids a Cabbage Patch Doll? In the 21st Century, it's electronics, and we've either camped out (or seen the campers) awaiting an iPhone or Wii game console. While we can have the "whatever it takes" attitude when it comes to our kids or personal wants, the workplace is a different story. With budget concerns and, yes, the possibility of the old, "so-and-so has one, so why don't I?" complaints,

we should think carefully before purchasing. Is this device cost-effective? Is there a real need for this to get the work done outside of the office or is it just a convenience or a status symbol?

There is no question that portable computing devices have greatly enhanced the agility of the workforce. It has never been easier to work off-site without losing productivity and communications capability.

We have all become experts at multi-tasking. Who hasn't sat in a meeting, pretending to "take notes" while really answering e-mail messages or reviewing a document. It begs the question: How much are we missing, and what risk are we creating, by multi-tasking, and not giving our full attention to the primary task? Let me ask the parents out there: What happens when your kids don't do their requisite chores or their grades slip? The toys, or those electronic devices, are the first things to go. If only the workplace was that easy!

We wouldn't let our kids play with their toys 24/7. For adults, it's the accessibility of personal devices, where, actually, *over-accessibility* becomes an issue. Only about a decade ago, we just didn't answer the phone (thank you, caller ID). Today, there are countless ways to work ... and to be reached: e-mail, pager, text message, and so on. You have to really be creative not to be "in touch," and the believability of "I didn't get the message" has shrunk to near nothing. Everyone needs some downtime, and the proliferation of the electronic devices is severely cutting into it. When are you NOT working when you have a portable device? Surprising as it may seem, the 24/7 worker isn't necessarily the most efficient worker. An August 2007 article in *CIO Magazine* <www.cio.com/article/132551> indicated that when people work long hours over a period of time, they actually become less effective, tend to make more mistakes, and increase the security risks.

As IT managers, we have a responsibility to our employees as well as to our companies to maximize the potential of everyone. But by giving the portable devices to everyone who asks for them, are we creating an unacceptable risk to both the company and to the person? The answers to all of the questions I've posed should drive the assignment of the devices, not just desire to have a new toy.

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